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Schools Won't Require Online Class. Yet.

By WINNIE HU

NEW JERSEY education officials are working on an ambitious redesign of the state's public high schools that is intended to better prepare students for college and the work force in the 21st century.

The redesign had called for every student — not just those who are college bound — to study Algebra II, laboratory sciences and foreign languages, pass more state tests and complete at least one online course in order to graduate. But education officials recently backed away from the online requirement because of concerns over the cost and whether such courses would meet state standards.

Tougher courses and testing are hardly surprising — but an online course? Online courses were once viewed as a poor substitute for in-class learning, a temporary solution for tennis prodigies, child actors and others who had to miss classes regularly. But in the past decade, virtual courses have cropped up nationwide as public schools have rushed to reconfigure traditional courses — from creative writing to calculus — for the Internet age.

More than 70 percent of the nearly 15,000 school districts in the United States currently offer at least one online course, enrolling more than a million students last school year alone, said Susan Patrick, president of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, which estimates that online enrollment has increased about 30 percent annually since 1997. "It's growing faster than any other innovation in K-12 education," she said.

In 2006, Michigan began requiring high school students to take an online course or have an online educational experience to graduate; Alabama adopted an online course requirement in 2008. Four other states, including New Jersey, have considered making online courses mandatory.

In addition, 34 states, from Florida to Idaho, have created and overseen "virtual schools" to provide online courses to school districts and students. Ms. Patrick said that the online courses allowed schools to offer classes students might not otherwise take because of a shortage of qualified teachers in a subject or too few students who might enroll. Online courses, she said, also give students a chance to learn at their own pace and to have contact with their teachers through e-mail, text messages and even phone calls.

In New Jersey, officials decided not to pursue the online course requirement — instead giving districts the option to offer them — after studying the proposal more closely in recent weeks, said Beth Auerswald, a spokeswoman for the State Department of Education. "The department had concerns about the cost of mandating an online course during these difficult fiscal times," she said. "And likewise, the department wants to ensure that online courses based in other states align with our curriculum standards."

Meanwhile, Ms. Auerswald said, state education officials are moving to develop a policy to regulate online courses and address some of the concerns. Currently, about 80,000 students, or 6 percent of New Jersey's 1.3 million public school students, take online courses, both in school and on their own time.

Frank Belluscio, a spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, said that while his group supported the push for tougher classes and graduation standards, it had not taken up some of the "minute details," like an online course requirement. He said, however, that the association was not opposed to online courses, noting that more and more staff training in education and other professions was taking place through online seminars, or Webinars.

"There may be value to exposing students to this type of instruction," said Mr. Belluscio, whose group offers Webinars for school board members. "But it may not be such a critical part of high school redesign that we need to make it a requirement."

In Chatham, 30 high school students have enrolled in online courses since the district began offering them for the first time this school year. In addition, nearly 90 percent of the 1,000 high school students there already do part of their class work online, be it submitting their papers or e-mailing questions to their teachers.

Jim O'Neill, Chatham's school superintendent, said that online courses help prepare students for college by making them fluent in technology. In the past three years, his district has spent \$360,000 to connect all six schools with high-tech fiber-optic cables that increase the district's Internet capabilities and allow every office and classroom to be hooked up.

Still, Mr. O'Neill said that he does not support mandating online courses for every high school student right now because many school districts do not have the infrastructure to support such a requirement and state education officials have yet to address critical issues, including whether time spent in an online course should count toward school attendance or instruction time.

"I would say it should be mandated in three years or so to give them time to get up to speed," Mr. O'Neill said.